

New Stem Cell Rules

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The good news about the Obama administration's new stem cell rules is that government money will pay for a lot more research than was possible under the Bush administration's cramped and ideologically driven restrictions. But some of the most promising future research could still be denied public support.

President George W. Bush imposed restrictions that limited federally supported research to a mere 21 stem cell lines that had been derived with private money from surplus embryos at fertility clinics before mid-2001.

Under the new guidelines, the National Institutes of Health will provide a review process by which scientists will be able to use many of the hundreds of cell lines that have since been created with private funds. And scientists will be able to use new stem cell lines provided they come from surplus fertility embryos that were donated under strict ethical rules.

Those rules stipulate that donors must be fully informed that any embryo donated for research would be destroyed in the process and that there are other choices for disposing of surplus embryos. Donors must also give written consent at the time of donation, have the right to change their minds and must not receive payment for the donation or expect medical or financial benefits later.

The N.I.H. will establish a panel to determine if important stem cell lines derived when the ethical requirements were less detailed can nevertheless qualify for support. To clear up any remaining confusion, the new guidelines call for establishing a registry at the N.I.H. to list all qualified stem cell lines.

Fearing controversy, the N.I.H. decided to deny support to research using lines that might eventually be created in the laboratory by "therapeutic cloning" to match specific patients with specific diseases. Such cells could provide a valuable way to study the early stages of a disease and to derive stem cell implants that would not be rejected by a patient's immune system.

Agency officials note, correctly, that no one has yet derived human embryonic stem cells through therapeutic cloning. And they contend that there is no strong public sentiment for moving beyond the use of surplus embryos that would otherwise be discarded.

The agency will need to reconsider those judgments as science and ethical thinking evolves. For now, the administration seems determined to follow Congressional and public opinion rather than lead it.